DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 312 CG 023 468

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TITLE The Moral and Ethical Orientations of Islam and Other Revealed Religions: A Comparative Perspective.
PUB DATE 12 Aug 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ethics; Foreign Countries; *Religion; *Religious Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Islam; Muslims

ABSTRACT

Islam is the dominant religion in some parts of Africa, Asia and Europe, and in all of North Africa and the Middle East. Muslim minority communities are found in almost all countries in the world. In social sciences, religion is defined as a system of ideas and institutions that have emerged in response to man's search for meaning, purpose, and security. However, in Islam, religion is defined as a complete way of life that has been handed down to man by Allah for the guidance and welfare of mankind for all times and for all places. Thus, Islam's definition of religion differs from that in the social sciences and at the same time, it forms the basis of the difference between Islam on the one hand, and Judaism and Christianity on the other. For more than any other revealed religion, Islam emphasizes adherence to the revealed message without any degree of change or adjustment in the original message, and derives guidance in all affairs and legislation in all matters from the original message as revealed in the Quaran, and explained through the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad. This is the basis of the difference between Islam and other religions which have accepted and incorporated man made laws and changes. (Some specific differences among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are discussed in the areas of commitment to beliefs and rituals; definition of sacred and profane; law as the source of norms; the monotheistic principles; private verus collective interest; social consequences of individual verus group orientation; and value orientation). (Author/BHK)

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THE MORAL AND ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS OF ISLAM AND OTHER REVEALED RELIGIONS:

A Comparative Perspective

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Paper presented at a symposium on
Religious Beliefs and Human Values:
The Case of Islam
The 98th Annual Convention of
The American Psychological Association

Sunday, August 12, 1990
1:00 - 2:50 P.M.

Westin Hotel, American Center
Boston, Massachusetts

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The Moral and Ethical Orientations of Islam and other Revealed Religions:

A Comparative Perspective

Introduction

Islam is the youngest of the major 'revealed' religions and Muslims along with Jews and Christians are described in the Quaran as the "people of the Book". Islam is the dominant religion in some parts of Africa, Asia and Europe and in all of North Africa and the Middle East. Muslim minority communities are found in almost all other countries in the world. One fifth of the world's population is Muslim and as we enter the twenty first century the proportion of Muslims in the world's population is expected to increase further.[1]

Definition of Religion

In social sciences religion is defined as a system of ideas and institutions that have emerged in response to man's search for meaning purpose and security.[2] However, in Islam religion is defined as a complete way of life that has been handed down to man by Allah for the guidance and welfare of mankind for all times and for all places.[3]

Thus, Islam's definition of religion differs from that in the social sciences and at the same time it forms the basis of the difference between Islam on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other. For more than any other revealed religion Islam emphasizes adherence to the revealed message without any degree of change or adjustment in the original message

and derives guidance in all affairs and legislation in all matters from the original message as revealed in the Quran and explained through the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad. This is the basis of the difference between Islam and the other religions which have accepted and incorporated man made laws and changes. Both Judaism and Christianity have undergone fundamental changes and are no longer in their original form. Some specific differences between these religions are as follows:

1. **Differences in the nature and degree of commitment to beliefs and rituals:**

According to the French sociologist Emile Durkhiem, religious phenomena may be classified into two categories, beliefs and rituals.[4] Beliefs are states of opinions and consist in representations and rites are determined modes of action. He also stated that the nature of religious thought is characterized by a division of the world into two domains, the sacred and the profane.[5] Using this frame of analysis we find that the three revealed religions vary in the nature and degree of emphasis placed on beliefs and on rituals. Christianity, for example, relies heavily on the belief component and its major thrust is towards establishing a distinction between sacred and profane as the definitive characteristics of objects in the external world; Judaism focuses on the ritual aspect of religions phenomena whereas Islam places equal emphasis on both, beliefs and on religious rituals.

2. Sacred and Profane

In Christianity, 'sacred' and 'profane' are the dual categories among which are divided all things and all affairs of men. However, in Judaism and Islam sacred and profane are not the qualities of objects external to the individual actor. Rather, these qualities lie in the nature of human action which are defined by the law as more or less sacred or profane. They emphasize the significance of adhering to prescribed conduct (ritual) as a necessary condition for the survival of the ethical principles (beliefs) and ultimately of the group (**ummah**) subscribing to these principles.

Islam particularly rejects iconic symbolism.[6] The only sacred being or object is God. Things of this world, natural and social phenomena are all creations of Allah and are not sacred or profane in themselves, but actions are. In Muslim casuistry, human actions are placed along a continuum divided into five intervals ranging from actions that are mandatory **(fard)** through recommended **(mubah)**, neutral **(muhaida)**, reprehensible **(makruh)** to forbidden **(haram)**. Most sacred are actions in the first category, most profane are actions in the last category.

3. Law as the source of norms

In Islam the law of God **(Shariah)** is the source of all social and cultural norms and values. The **shariah** is not changeable and it is not fallible. Application of the **shariah** may require fresh interpretation **(ijtehad)** but it may not counter or violate any of the principles of the **shariah** as already established by

revelation.

In Christian Society the sources of social legislation are the social and cultural norms and thus are changeable as the norms and values change. But the dynamics for change in Islam are to be found in the limited area of reconciling the practice with the law, and only to a very limited extent in reconciling the law with the established practice by extracting necessary meaning from the law. This contrasts with the dynamics of change in Christianity where the concern is with reconciling the practice with what is believed to be pragmatic.[7] The test of the first is its rightness or correctness according to a given standard or law. That of the second is its functionality in attaining the preferred objective. Christianity is more concerned with individual salvation than with the success of the given normative system. This may explain why pragmatism has come to characterize the evaluative system of the Christian West and why there is disapproval of the practical and the functional expressly for the sake of their practicality and functionality in the Islamic societies. As one Muslim writer has noted, ".... the permission for compromise (under constraint) does not make expediency (hila) permissible".[8]

4. The monotheistic principle

All revealed religions are monotheistic but Islam goes the furthest in stressing the concept of tawheed (oneness or unity). Not only God is one but life is one and people are one. After life is but a continuation of this life. All affairs of men

whether religious, political, economic or familial are the legitimate concern of the Divine order. In Islam there is no separation of church and state or delineation of the "realm of Ceasar" and the "realm of Christ". The monotheistic principle is extended to incorporate all reality.

In Judaism the concept of oneness is applied to Yahweh (God) and to His chosen people; the monotheistic principle is mainly theological and expressed in communal terms.[9] In Islam it is metaphysical and actualized through ideological synthesis, incorporating all reality. Thus, the concept of **tawhid** in Islam remains the central pillar of faith and distinguishes it from other faiths.

Although Judaism also emphasizes ideological and systemic unity, as does Islam, there are major differences in application as necessitated by the differences in the characteristics of Muslim and Jewish populations, among which size and ethnicity being the most significant ones.

In fact, the particular history and numerical position of the Jews makes their inclusion in any generalized system of classification of religious types a rather difficult task, and particularly so because of the close association of the concept of ethnicity with that of religious community. Whereas Jews are held together by such "ethnic" ties and a common sharing of a ritual, Muslims are held together by religious ties with variations in ritual and practice. The unitary character of the Jewish cultural and social system is a product of its

particular cultural ethos. It incorporates religious ritual into daily living and proclaims unity of the sacred with the secular. In the case of Muslims, however, structural unity is consciously imposed and cultivated.

5. Private versus collective Interest

The individualistic orientation of salvation religion is expressed in its concern with the spiritual salvation of the individual believer, an emphasis that is clearly observable in Christianity and particularly in its Protestant version. The German sociologist Max Weber in his study, **The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism** demonstrates the significance of this ethos for the structure and process of an on going social system.[10]

Islam is greatly concerned with the welfare of the group and with the continuing viability and constant implementation of the legal and ethical systems. A **hadith** of the Prophet describes the position of the individual Muslim as that of "a stone in the structure of society.... an integral part of society, paying for it with his person and his property". Furthermore, the religious rites and rituals which are obligatory for all Muslims are predominantly social in nature.[11] They are aimed at promoting social contact and social interactions as we see in the following:

a) Prayer five times a day which is compulsory for all Muslims is held to have greater value (**sawab**) if performed in congregation.

b) The annual pilgrimage to Makkah (**haj**) also serves to promote solidarity among Muslims who come together annually on fixed days and experience an immense sense of sharing and obedience to the command of Allah.

c) The month of fasting is a period of intensive socialization with generous sharing of food and other material goods.

d) Compulsory charity (**zakah**) is one of the required pillars of faith and serves to strengthen the feeling of brotherhood among all Muslims, rich and poor.

Islam is in every sense a 'social' religion. Muslims wherever they might be, tend to transgress linguistic and cultural barriers and share in a strong social bond. Islam emphasizes social relations and defines the primary responsibility of the individual as lying in fulfilling roles that have function for the social system.

Christianity focuses on salvation of the individual soul and offers its adherents the basic choice between this world and the other world; the world of flesh versus the world of spirit; and damnation versus salvation. The dichotomy implies an ordinal nature of choice objects, one category being superior and therefore preferable to the other. Islam, on the other hand, offers nominal categories of choice objects. The choice is between the chosen (Islamic) system versus an alternative system, the one being perfect the other not perfect, one leading to salvation the other to damnation. However the superiority of

the chosen system is a function of preference rather than preference being the function of superiority. In other words, the Islamic system is superior because it is the chosen and preferred system. The criteria for excellence lie within the system. This contrasts with the position taken by salvation religions that the chosen category is a preferred category because it is considered to be superior to the alternative, the world of spirit being superior to the world of flesh.

And so, in Islam, there are no options. Either one subscribes wholly to the prescribed system and becomes a part of the community of believers, or one is totally out of it. In salvation religions whatever choice the individual makes, whether he chooses the world of flesh or the world of spirit, he remains a Christian. There may be "good Christians," implying an ordinal nature of dimension approaching perfection and superiority, but no parallel terms are available for Jews or Muslims. One either is or is not a Muslim or a Jew, sectarian preference notwithstanding. There are no approximations to perfection.

6. Social Consequences of Individual versus Group Orientation

All religions are oriented towards their followers both as individuals and as collectivities. All are altruistic systems.[12] However, there are differences in emphasis on the various means of salvation. For instance, penance and ascetic withdrawal from the society play an important role in the Christian concept of salvation, where as in Islam such actions are discouraged as forms detrimental to the larger and long term

interests of the individual and the society. To ensure salvation and even to pay for one's sins the prescribed acts and rituals in Islam are all geared toward the temporal community and aim to enhance its solidarity.

In Christianity deviations from the normative expectations are considered as harmful primarily for the individual, but in Islam such deviations are also regarded as equally harmful for the community. The interactional focus which determines the value orientation of salvation religion is that of man and God. The position of the individual is defined in terms of his relationship with his God. Thus, the evaluation is mainly in terms of morality rather than ethics, which is social in nature. In this sense, the individual Christian derives the reward of His grace and the punishment of His wrath solely from his own actions.[13]

The interactional focus in Islam is one between man and man. The believer is answerable not only to God but, in a practical sense, to the rest of the community which shares his ills and his good fortune both material and spiritual. The concept of the religious community, the nation of believers (**ummah**), is conspicuously absent in Christianity but it has a dominant position in Islam and in Judaism.

7. Value Orientation

Using the scheme of analysis developed by Talcott Parsons, we find that the value orientation in Islam is particularistic.[14] The emphasis is on the given law and not on the principle of

jurisprudence as such. In contrast, Christianity focuses on such abstract concepts as love, virtue and truth. It maintains universalistic standards in the evaluation and application of normative expectations. Specificity is employed in it's application of the normative expectation in a given role and a given situation. Achievement is measured in terms of success in fulfilling the normative expectations, in the process of which effective neutrality is utilized as the restraining factor according to the principle of delayed gratification. All this is directed towards promoting the welfare of the individual and the salvation of his soul.

As an ethical religion with its defined code of law, Islam employs particularistic standards in the evaluation and application of normative expectations. Because of the diffuseness of the system of expectations which are faced by a given actor, there is greater restriction, as well as greater freedom, of action. This diffuseness of the scope of interest in the individual's actions and affairs is further accompanied by a system of releases as provided by affectivity as the preferred mode of expression. Affective neutrality (delayed gratification) can be employed successfully only when self-orientation is the guide for action, the results of which will accrue directly to the actor and the reward for which is ensured for him in his present life and even in his life in the hereafter.

All actions of Muslims are subject to the ethical considerations of legalistic system. As collectivity is

considered the superior or super-ordinate reality, the evaluation of the individual is in terms of the quality of his membership in the collectivity, and his social position is usually assigned on the basis of his contribution to the welfare of the community.

8. **Conclusion**

All religions are in one sense regulative institutions with the explicit purpose of attaining certain goals which are seen as in the larger interest of members. From this level of general similarity, differences appear as varying emphasis is placed on the means and the methods (appreciative, remissive, achievement-oriented) and objectives (individual salvation versus salvation of the group, or the individual versus the collective interest of the believers). Some of the outstanding differences in the world view and general value orientations among the followers of the revealed religions may be understood and explained in terms of these differences of emphasis on means and objectives.

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Notes

1. See Saleha Abedin "Demographic and Socio-Economic Data on "Muslim Majority and Minority Communities" in **Journal,** Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs volume 11:No.1, forthcoming.
2. Emile Durkheim, **Elementary Forms of Religious Life,** trans. by Joseph W. Swaine, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1947. First published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1915. See especially pp.51-57
3. See Abul Ala Mawdudi, **Towards Understanding Islam,** trans. and ed. by Khurshid Ahmad, London: The Islamic Foundation, 1980.
4. Durkheim, op cit.
5. Sacred approximates the ideal. Thus the religious law in Judaism and Islam is considered sacred because it is seen as approximating the ideal. Profane actions or ideas are those that are related to the temporal world and are subject to its weaknesses and vagaries. See Mir Valiuddin, **The Essential Features of Islam,** Hyderabad: Osmania University Press, no date, pp.270-276.
6. Idolatory is particularly disapproved of in Islam. The use of reproductions of human and animal forms or natural objects as part of the religious ritual is specifically prohibited. See, for example Abd-al-Rehman Azzam, **The Eternal Message of Muhammad,** New York: The New American Library, 1964, pp.29, 45, 53-54, 57-58.

7. For a discussion of the dynamics for change in Christianity see Talcott Parsons, "Chritianity and Modern Industrial Society", in Edward B. Tiryakian, ed., **Sociological Theory, Values and Social Cultural Change**, Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press 1963, p.42

8. Fadhel Jamali, **Letters on Islam**, London: Oxford University Press, 1965 p.254

9. Milton Steinberg, **Basic Judaism**, New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1947

10. Max Weber, **The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism**, trans. by Talcott Parsons, New York: Scribner and Sons, 1958. First published in 1930. See also Max Weber, **Economy and Society**, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, New York: Bedminster Press, 1968, Vol. II, pp.623-627

11. See Abul Ala Mawduli, **The Islamic Way of Life**, Lahore: Islamic Publications, Ltd., 1967

12. See Paul Tillich, **The Dynamics of Faith**, New York: Harper and Row, 1947

13. Ernst Troeltsch, **The Social Teachings of Christian Churches**, 2 Vols., Trans. by Olive Wyon, with an introduction by H. Richard Neibuhr, New York: McMillan, 1931, originally printed in Germany in 1911.

14. Talcott Parson, **The Social System**, London: Collier McMillan Limited and The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961. See also Parsons, "Christianity and Modern Industrial Society" in Edward A. Tiryakian, ed., op. cit. pp.33-70

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